ENGLISH, LITERACY, AND COMMUNICATION

Commas, semicolons, and colons

Difficulty level: Intermediate

English, Literacy, and Communication

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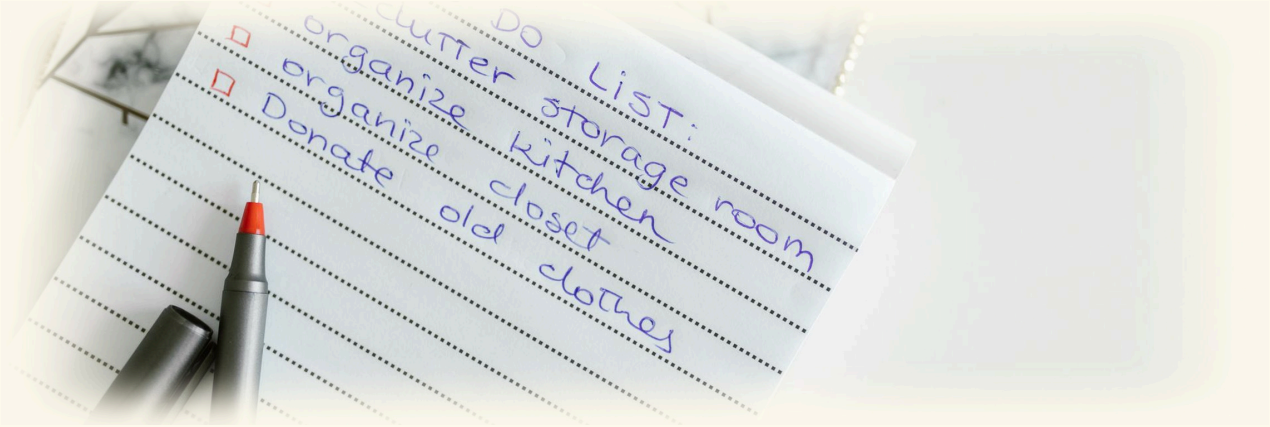
Overview of the concept

This is how you use commas, semicolons, and colons to guide your reader through a list, a pause, or an explanation. Each mark does a different job, and using the right one means your reader never loses track of what you mean. Good punctuation is invisible when it works, but its absence makes even a good idea hard to read.



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Worked examples

EXAMPLE 1

Q Fix the punctuation: I bought apples oranges and bananas.

SOLUTION

This is a list of three items.

Put commas between the items in the list.

Fixed: I bought apples, oranges, and bananas.

EXAMPLE 2

Q Fix the punctuation: I like tea it is warm.

SOLUTION

Both sides are complete sentences, closely related.

Join them with a semicolon.

Fixed: I like tea; it is warm.

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Practice questions

1 Fix: She brought pens pencils and paper.

- **A** She brought pens, pencils, and paper.
- **B** She brought pens pencils, and paper.
- **C** She brought pens; pencils; and paper.
- **D** She brought pens, pencils, paper.

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2 Fix: The shop sells three things bread milk and cheese.

- **A** The shop sells three things bread, milk, and cheese.
- **B** The shop sells three things; bread, milk, and cheese.
- **C** The shop sells three things: bread, milk, and cheese.
- **D** The shop sells three things: bread milk and cheese.

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3 Fix: He is tired he stayed up late. (use a semicolon)

- **A** He is tired: he stayed up late.
- **B** He is tired; he stayed up late.
- **C** He is tired, he stayed up late.
- **D** He is tired, so he stayed up late.

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4 Fix: It was a long hot day.

- **A** It was a long, hot day.
- **B** It was a long hot, day.
- **C** It was, a long hot day.
- **D** It was a long hot day.

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5 Fix: However we left early.

- **A** However we left early.
- **B** However, we left early.
- **C** However we, left early.
- **D** However, we left, early.

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6 Fix: I have one goal to pass. (use a colon before the explanation)

- **A** I have one goal, to pass.
- **B** I have one goal; to pass.
- **C** I have one goal: to pass.
- **D** I have one goal. To pass.

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7 Fix: After dinner we went home.

- **A** After dinner, we went home.
- **B** After, dinner we went home.
- **C** After dinner we, went home.
- **D** After dinner we went home.

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8 Fix: She ran fast and she won the race.

A She ran fast and she won the race.

B She ran, fast and she won the race.

C She ran fast, and she won the race.

D She ran fast and, she won the race.

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9 Fix: He said one thing wait. (use a colon before the word)

A He said one thing: wait.

B He said: one thing wait.

C He said one thing; wait.

D He said one thing, wait.

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10

Fix: We met on May 3 2026.

A We met on May, 3 2026.

B We met on May 3, 2026.

C We met, on May 3 2026.

D We met on May 3 2026.

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ANSWER KEY

1. She brought pens, pencils, and paper.

2. The shop sells three things: bread, milk, and cheese.

3. He is tired; he stayed up late.

4. It was a long, hot day.

5. However, we left early.

6. I have one goal: to pass.

7. After dinner, we went home.

8. She ran fast, and she won the race.

9. He said one thing: wait.

10. We met on May 3, 2026.

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